

FICTION

A Comic Novel About the George W. Bush No One Knows

By Kurt Andersen

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LANDFALL

By Thomas Mallon

Our current presidency is more like fiction than ever seemed possible — a postmodern black comedy with a crazed protagonist hellbent on blurring all lines between fantasy and reality. Which is just one of the things that make reading and judging a work of fiction about the last Republican president, George W. Bush, somewhat complicated.

“Landfall” is Thomas Mallon’s 10th novel. Most of the others are also set in Washington around Republican presidents, all the way back to Abraham Lincoln. Yet even though the presidency in this book ended only a decade ago, its past is a foreign country nonetheless. A government run by establishment Republicans, many of them decent and idealistic? How quaint.

The author is an establishment Republican. He ghostwrote Dan Quayle’s memoir and served as deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities under Bush. (Disclosure: The N.E.H. has provided funding to the public radio show I host.) In a 2016 article he called his party’s imminent convention “a political Jonestown.” Of course, the cyanide in Donald Trump’s Kool-Aid turned out to be a slow-acting kind, and in fact he’s done Mallon a favor, making this an optimal moment to publish a sympathetic novel concerning a bad-but-not-*that*-bad Republican president.

Previous fiction about Washington politics mostly avoided using real names of the living people they fictionalized, from Henry Adams’s “Democracy” through Allen Drury’s “Advise and Consent.” Even in Philip Roth’s satirical fantasy “Our Gang,” Nixon and the other characters had fictional names, as did the Clintons et al. in Joe Klein’s “Primary Colors.” But by 2008 it seemed almost quaint when Curtis Sittenfeld altered Laura and George Bush’s names and backgrounds in her excellent novel “American Wife.” Oliver Stone’s biopic “W.” and Will Ferrell’s Bush play, “You’re Welcome America,” appeared around that time, and since then naming names has become the Washington-fiction norm, as in movies like “Vice.” So, no surprise, Mallon’s three most recent novels — “Watergate”; “Finale,” about Reagan; and now “Landfall” — are jam-packed with “real” people, a hundred apiece.

That extreme celebrity aside, however, Mallon writes old-school Washington fiction in the Ward Just tradition, neither Gore Vidalian cynicism nor, despite its funny moments — at a Christopher Hitchens party, “John Edwards and Donatella Versace silently marveled at each other’s appearance” — Chris Buckleyesque comedy.

As teenagers in 1978, the two main characters, Ross and Allison, meet at a W.-for-Congress campaign event in Lubbock — at which Ross encounters Bush too, and “vaguely realized that ... he was a little in love with both of them.” Ross and Allie date a bit but that’s that. Ross goes from Lubbock to Harvard for a Ph.D., becomes a professor, whereafter “being a registered Republican academic made him enough of a *rara avis*” to get hired as a federal humanities bureaucrat in Washington (in other words, much like Mallon). Which enables Ross and Allie to re-meet cute after 27 years apart, just when Ross’s marriage to “his Bush-hating